

Baptists: What Makes a Baptist a Baptist?

**“...Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect...”
I Peter 3:15 NIV**

“I just believe in being a Christian—I don’t want to be part of a denomination.” Have you ever heard a statement such as this? It seems very pious, but it makes it sound like there is something wrong with being part of a denomination of Christians.

What Is a “Denomination?”

Sometimes people do not distinguish between a “denomination” and a “religious organization.” “Denomination” describes a set of beliefs and practices held in common by a group of persons. Denominations usually develop various organizations to help fulfill the values and beliefs of the denomination, but the organizations are not the denomination, they are just an expression of it. For example, the Baptist General Convention of Texas, the Southern Baptist Convention and the Baptist World Alliance are not separate denominations; they are organizations within the Baptist denomination.

Although some people feel that it would be ideal if all Christians held exactly the same beliefs and followed the same practices, that is not the way it is—and never has been. From the beginning of the Christian movement, various opinions have existed about different matters such as the nature of the church, the way of salvation and the meaning of baptism.

Denominations are a fact. They exist and they are not vanishing. In fact, some, such as the Baptist denomination, are growing throughout the world. And denominations are important. They make a big difference in the lives of persons and in the world. The denomination a person is part of certainly has an impact on that person’s life. So it is important to know what denominations believe and practice.

What Makes Baptists Distinctive?

If someone were to ask you, “What is the one thing that makes the Baptist denomination different from other Christian denominations?” what would you say? Is it baptism by immersion of persons who have believed in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior? Is it a strong commitment to the concept of the priesthood of the believer? Is it an enduring belief in religious freedom?

Each of these is certainly held by Baptist Christians. But Christians of other denominations also hold them, although in some cases with a bit of a different interpretation.

The fact is that there is no single belief or practice that makes Baptists distinctive from other Christians. So what makes a Baptist a Baptist?

A combination of beliefs and practices sets Baptists apart from other Christian groups. There is a distinctive group of doctrines and polities for Baptists, a sort of Baptist recipe. Like most recipes, each of the ingredients is not unique to Baptists, but the total mix is distinctively Baptist. Although some of those ingredients are part of the recipe for other Christian groups, no other Christian group has the same combination of beliefs and practices as Baptists do.

Baptists come in a variety of “flavors.” They hold different interpretations and views on certain issues, such as the Second Coming of Christ, worship styles and denominational organization. But all Baptists have the same basic ingredients. There are certain ingredients that must be included, or the recipe does not produce a Baptist. Leave the cornmeal out of cornbread and substitute white flour, and you do not get cornbread. Similarly, leave out a key ingredient of the Baptist recipe, and you do not get a Baptist.

The Baptist Recipe

What are these key ingredients in the Baptist recipe? Some of them we have in common with Christians of most all denominations, such as belief in God and in Jesus Christ as Savior. However, Baptist beliefs about some major matters differ from those held by certain other groups. For example, although practically all Christian groups declare that baptism is significant for Christians, Baptists hold a different view of baptism than most. In the weeks to come, this series will discuss what that difference is and why it is important.

The Baptist recipe includes several key beliefs or doctrines:

–the Lordship of Jesus Christ

–the Bible as the sole written authority for faith and practice

–soul competency

–salvation from sin and eternal death to forgiveness and eternal life only by faith in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior who is the grace gift of God

–the priesthood of each believer and of all believers in Christ

–believer’s baptism

–baptism and the Lord's Supper as wonderfully symbolic but not essential for salvation

–church membership composed only of persons who have been born again

–religious freedom and its corollary, the separation of church and state

Built upon the foundation of these beliefs are certain practices or polities that are part of the Baptist recipe:

–congregational church governance under the Lordship of Christ

–the autonomy of churches

–voluntary cooperation for various causes

Closely related to these beliefs and practices are a number of emphases that characterize most Baptists:

–evangelism

–missions

–Christian education

–ministry

–social concern

In order to carry these out, Baptists have organized in various ways beyond local congregations, such as associations of churches, societies, conventions, fellowships, unions and alliances. Baptists have also established numerous institutions such as those for education, missions, and the care of children, the aged and the ill. The common ingredient in all of these is voluntary cooperation.

Baptists endeavor to base each belief, practice, emphasis and organization on the teachings of the Bible. The desire of Baptists is to be as close to the New Testament model for an individual Christian and for a church that is humanly possible with God's help through the instruction and empowering of the Holy Spirit.

What Difference Does It Make?

What difference does a person's denomination make? It makes a lot of difference. There are wonderfully dedicated Christians in various denominations, but there are distinctive beliefs which we hold dear as Baptists that are compelling reasons to be part of the Baptist denomination. For example, Baptists hold that salvation is by grace through faith alone and not grace/faith plus baptism, or sacrament, or church membership. Baptists insist that a church ought to determine who its pastor will be rather than having a pastor assigned by a person or a group outside of the local congregation.

Does the Baptist denomination matter? Yes, most definitely! The Baptist denomination has made and continues to make a difference in the world. For example, we are free to worship in our country due in large measure to the sacrificial and unselfish efforts of persons who were part of the Baptist denomination. Baptists have championed religious freedom for all to worship according to the dictate of conscience without interference of government or religious organizations. They have done this in spite of persecution. Baptists continue to work for religious freedom for all persons throughout the world.

“As Baptist principles are peculiar to Baptists, every Baptist church, with all its appointments, from preacher to Sunday-school teacher, ought to stand, in the community where it holds forth the word, for something different from any other congregation.”

J. B. Gambrell (b. 1841- d.1921)

Baptist pastor, university president, editor,
seminary professor, denominational leader/statesman